Hold Me Fast (And Fear Me Not)

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Hold Me Fast (And Fear Me Not)

by SleepsWithCoyotes

Summary

The faerieland is not actually all that pleasant, thanks, but never let it be said Will Graham can't roll with a situation.

Notes

Moving all of my WIPs from tumblr, because inevitably I fall asleep before I can finish the last three lines of a post, and then I've got a fight on my hands. XD (I'll still be posting things there, but yeah, it's fic dump time.) Also since I can't currently play any of the games I want to be playing, expect a revolving update of anywhere between five to seven fics, because my brain *can not* be left to its own devices. Like, ever. For any reason. So...shorter chapters than my usual, but a lot more of them, probably. Sorry in advance! XD

ADDED: Whoops, forgot to mention, title is from Child Ballad 39A, in case you were curious.

Chapter 1

Head pounding, stomach still unsettled from the turbulence of a fading thunderstorm that nearly rerouted his flight in, Will is the last to arrive on the scene. The grim-faced sheriff's deputy who ferries him in from the airport barely says one word to him after establishing his credentials, such as they are. Jack's been finding it a lot harder lately to pull Will in as a consultant, but Will doesn't mind the red tape. He definitely doesn't miss the small talk, though having to be chauffeured everywhere is grating. He knows it's nothing personal, that a history of seizures, however curable, would mean an automatic license suspension for anyone. Part of him still can't help feeling like his movements are being curtailed, making him easier to keep tabs on.

That's paranoid thinking, of course. He makes a point of shoving that feeling away anytime it rears its head. He refuses to believe he's that kind of crazy.

He doesn't ask any questions as they pull off the two-lane highway onto a narrow dirt road, splashing through potholes full of muddy water. Winter's fled early here, or else they've hit a warm snap. There's no snow left on the ground, and the thick stands of evergreens scattered through waterlogged skeletons of maple and elm brighten the woods until it almost looks like spring.

He only counts three houses on that long, lonely stretch of road, sees a few lights on but no one stirring outside. The fourth house they come to is just the opposite: dark windows that stand empty even of curtains, too many cars leaving deep ruts all over the overgrown lawn. When they pull in and park next to a dark SUV, Will's not surprised.

The air is thick with the smell of ozone and leaf rot as Will climbs out of the cruiser, tall grass dampening his pants legs halfway to the knee. Above the sky is crowded with spent rainclouds, sunset painting oranges and golds over drifts of deep blue. A few local officers stand clustered around a state patrol cruiser; they look over at him with vague curiosity, but they're too deep in their own tense conversation to pay him much attention.

Jack comes barreling out the front door of the house with a purposeful stride, jerking his head for Will to fall in step. "Good," Jack says. "You're right on time."

Rather than heading back inside, Jack leads him around the side, face grim. Will has to stretch his legs to keep up. "So what are we looking at?"

"That's what I'm hoping you'll tell me." Jack glances at him sidelong, his scrutiny a throwback to the early days of their association, before he'd learned to trust Will's judgment. There's doubt in his eyes now, and Will knows exactly who to thank for that. With a brief headshake, Jack powers on. "Someone's been using this forest as their hunting ground. Vacationers found the first one--came up for the weekend to a little cottage they rented and found they weren't the only recent visitors. Bones in the backyard. Human. Small, still fresh. When we went to question the cabin's owners, turned out they'd conveniently disappeared. Or maybe not so conveniently; they're not the only prime suspects to have vanished."

"Did they have any children?"

"No. And we haven't been able to tell much from what little was left. Two kids, maybe three, all soft issue stripped, bones cracked open by some pretty strong jaws."

"Human as well?"

"Only if they've been filing their teeth sharp. The pattern's closer to human than animal, but you know the fae aren't picky eaters. Even if they didn't make the kill themselves, that wouldn't have stopped them from taking advantage of a free meal."

"And it's not like we've been able to do a bite analysis on most of them," Will mutters, curbing his own stride as Jack's slows. He spots a pair of familiar faces moving busily around something half-hidden in the grass near the center of the back yard. The missing third of what should be a trio makes his jaw ache, clenched on equal measures of guilt and fury.

Jack nods, but something has him distracted. Stopping well away from the others, he slips his hands into his coat pockets and waits patiently until Will's eyes skitter reluctantly to meet his. "There's one other thing. I've invited Dr. Lecter to come in on this one."

Taking a deep breath in through his nose, Will holds it until he can be certain he won't exhale a diatribe. He may have been exonerated of murder, but he's convinced precisely no one that he isn't crazy. Making a scene now won't help. "Well at least it's not one of his own this time," he grumbles, lip curling unconsciously.

"Will." Jack's not his father, and having been let down so thoroughly, Will shouldn't give a damn about disappointing him, but paradoxically, it makes him want to try harder. He wants--needs--Jack to *see*.

"You know I'm right."

"I don't know any such thing," Jack says repressively. "I'm listening, not convinced."

"Jack--"

Jack holds up a hand. The steeling of his expression says his patience is at an end. "You don't have any proof, Will. Until you do, I can't be hearing this."

Will clenches jaw and stares at the forensics team. They're probably too far away to hear this conversation, but Will knows he's been noticed. Zeller in particular keeps almost looking their way, only to catch himself each time.

"Look," Jack says on a heavy sigh. "I'm not asking you to be best friends with the guy. I just need you to be professional. Can you do that?"

Can you *manage* that, he means. Will may be ambivalent where Jack's disappointment is concerned, but Jack's expectations have definitely lowered as well. Will gives him a tight nod, unwilling to promise anything else.

Jack, it seems, will take it. "Good."

Shoving emotion aside, Will drags his mind back to the business at hand. "So this isn't the first. How many more?"

"Five confirmed kills before today, all of them kids. We've been getting reports of missing hikers as well, but no sign of bodies."

Jack doesn't quite falter as he imparts this news, but the similarities to another case can hardly be ignored. And with what they learned the last time around--

"Maybe he's storing the bigger ones up for winter," Will suggests dryly.

Jack makes a face but doesn't dismiss the idea outright. "That's what you're here to tell me."

Lovely.

Distracted by Jack, he doesn't notice Lecter's approach until the man falls in on Will's right as they go to join Price and Zeller with the body. Will stiffens automatically, but Lecter merely inclines his head, saying, "Good evening, Will."

He looks professional as always--three piece suit in dark brown, expensive coat draped over one arm, unstyled hair softening the imposing effect his ruthless perfection casts--his expression equal parts hopeful and grave. Like a dog hoping for a kind word after a scolding.

"Dr. Lecter," Will grits out through a tight, false smile. "Here to put your expertise to work?"

"Will," Jack warns, frowning like he's trying to decide whether he needs to get between the two of them.

Hannibal surprises him with a nod. "As it happens, I grew up surrounded by deep forest. If it's a type of scavenger I'm familiar with, I may recognize their work."

"Huh." They've talked a little about Hannibal's childhood, but only in the very broadest of terms. A sister he'd felt responsible for, an uncle who'd taken him in. They've never spoken of location; a child-sized Hannibal running wild in the woods isn't at all what he was expecting. "Hard to picture you outside a city," Will admits with a frown.

Hannibal smiles, but there's something a little...empty in it. Something absent. Good memories, if Will had to take a guess. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Jack eyes them both warily for a moment as if expecting this moment of civil language to devolve into pistols at dawn, but when Will clamps his teeth shut on any further conversation, he shakes off his misgivings. "What have you got for me?" he calls ahead as Price and Zeller straighten to watch their approach.

There really isn't much left, not that there was much to begin with. There's a scattering of bones so splintered it's hard to tell what shape they'd once held, a few strands of bright blonde hair and a brownish mass that had likely once matched before being swallowed and then regurgitated. Gall bladders were apparently not a favorite either; one had been picked out and left behind, unbroken. A neighbor's cat had used to do the same thing with the mice it caught.

"Well, it's fresh...really fresh," Price offers with a grimace. "Might not be more than a few hours old. It's almost like they're being left where someone knows they'll be found."

"At an abandoned house?" Jack questions, brow arched.

Zeller nods at the back patio with a snort. "That many beer cans? Local party spot."

"Bingo," Price agrees. "The owner's in Florida...retired, couldn't sell the place, so they left it to one of the local real estate firms to handle. The sheriff said they do regular drive-bys to try to keep the kids away; it was one of her deputies that found the body."

"Or bodies," Zeller points out.

Price shrugs. "Or bodies."

"Dr. Lecter?" Jack asks. Will narrows his eyes. Time was, he'd be asked to read the scene first, Jack asking for the others' input mainly to fill in the holes.

Lecter shakes his head with troubled frown, but not a *confused* one. "It looks familiar," he admits. All eyes turn to him, even Will's. "We often found small animals in such a state in the woods where I grew up."

Jack tilts his head. "But?"

"Are you certain the body was found here?"

Price and Zeller exchange a glance; Zeller shrugs, but Price answers. "The blood pattern says this is the place," he explains, waving his pen at the half-trampled grass surrounding the remains. "No trail leading to it, none leading away."

"Is that strange?" Jack asks.

Hannibal tightens his mouth, eyes scanning the lawn as if looking for something specific. "Possibly. New lands, new customs...instincts changed by interbreeding.... But if these are any kin to the creatures I'm familiar with, then the bodies should have been--"

Will looks up sharply, paling. Nausea roils in his gut as he remembers the wounded animal cries he'd heard at the height of his fever, but from the startled consternation of the others, he's not the only one to hear it this time: the thin, soft crying of a terrified child.

Someone grabs his arm before he can take one step towards the woods. It takes him a moment to shake it off, even once he realizes the restraining hand is Hannibal's.

"Will."

"You hear that?" Will asks the others, ignoring Hannibal's warning tone.

"People!" Jack shouts, causing a few spooked deputies to jump. "Eyes sharp. Nobody move."

"Yes," Hannibal continues firmly, focused on Will as if they're the only two people for miles. "I'll also remind you we were just discussing the fae. You don't think a sudden call for help is at all suspicious?"

Will scoffs, upper lip curling. "There's twenty humans here, and most of them have guns. The fae aren't that bold."

"They're also not opposed to an easy meal. You know--"

"I know I'm not going to let another kid die," Will snarls over him. "Not on your say-so."

The others may think he's referring to the sad collection of too-small bones at their feet, but Hannibal hears the name Will can't bring himself to say.

Hannibal sees what he means to do before anyone else and makes another grab for him, but Will shakes him off, ignoring Jack's furious shout as he makes a break for the trees.

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"Damn it," Jack growls. He doesn't believe for one second that there's a kid out there, but he doesn't have much choice. They're here to stop a killer, and if the killer happens to be fae, so be it. He just could have done without having his hand forced by Will's oddball vendetta. "All right, people: pair up for a sweep. And somebody go after Graham!"

Of all the times to go off half-cocked....

"Wait, uh...Dr. Lecter," Zeller pipes up with a worried grimace. "What were you saying about the bodies?"

Dragging his eyes back from the tree line, Hannibal has to shift gears visibly to answer the question. Jack would bet good money that the only thing stopping him from volunteering himself as Will's tether yet again is the unpredictable way Will's bound to react. "They were usually found in rings," he explains as he collects his thoughts, "left where they'd be immediately noticeable so we'd know we'd encroached too far on their territory."

Territory? Jack doesn't like the sound of that. "Any sign of a ring?" he asks the other two.

Price hunches a shoulder. "None around the bodies, but you can see that. None that we found in the immediate area, either."

Hannibal nods but still looks troubled, staring pensively after Graham. Jack still can't quite wrap his head around Will's accusations, even though Graham's never been wrong before. He almost wants to feel sorry for Lecter, pinning his friendship so firmly on someone so clearly determined to think the worst of him.

"What else has you worried?" Jack asks, neck prickling with unease. Most days it's like Hannibal has icewater in his veins; Jack's never seen him look this disturbed, and that includes the day Jack stopped Will from shooting Hannibal.

"The fae of my youth traveled in packs," Hannibal says slowly. "Large ones."

Jack's face goes cold as the blood starts to drain away. "Large enough to be a problem for twenty armed men?"

He really hopes Hannibal will laugh that notion off, but there's not an ounce of humor in his grim, "Indeed."

Another sound rises on the breeze just then: a shout of pain in a familiar voice that rises to a high, hoarse scream. Heart hammering in his chest, Jack freezes despite himself, struck motionless by some inherent *wrongness* he can't quite quantify. They all do.

All but Hannibal, who takes off without hesitation at a speed Jack wouldn't have thought him capable of, plunging into the darkness under the trees without a single look back.

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Part of Will knows he's doing a foolish thing. The rest of him couldn't resist if he'd wanted to, and that's what convinces him he's probably chasing a lie. He's had the same training in resisting a fae lure as everyone in law enforcement, but this one hooks him where he lives. He's failed to save too many children already; he's not going to risk one more.

All the same, he's not prepared to stumble out into a clearing not far from the edge of the trees and see it light up in a sickly glow as blue-white toadstools push up out of the mulch like desperate, seeking fingers. Stopping in his tracks, he spins a tight circle, looking for the attack sure to come. Stronger than the fear dropping slivers of ice down his spine is the hot ball of resentment in the pit of his stomach at knowing Hannibal was right.

"I'm not here to beg a boon," he calls to the shadows under the trees. "I'm not alone, either. You're on human lands--"

He doesn't recognize the chorus of hissing for laughter at first, distracted by the direction of the sound. They're not under the trees; they're in them, perched in the branches and peering down at him for a better look. He can barely make them out in the half-light, unsure whether the shaggy quills bristling off them are their clothes or armor or just the way they're made. They're smaller than him, but maybe not by much; it's hard to tell from the way they're coiled in on themselves, with an animal's readiness to pounce.

"Human lands," one scoffs, snickering like Will told some kind of joke. Its accent is strange, with a lilting drawl to its vowels unplaceably foreign.

"Not on the land," another points out with overdone innocence.

"In the trees," a third cackles, mostly breath.

"You're the trespasser."

"Our land," one growls, lifting the short hairs on the back of Will's neck.

"Marked it."

"See?"

More and more of the toadstools poke their way through the rain-soft dirt, until the circle they make at the clearing's edge is nearly unbroken.

"Anything inside our land is ours," he's told as he starts to edge his way backwards, afraid to turn his back on the trees but equally certain they're already behind him. If that circle closes completely before he makes his way out--

"But this one's too old," one complains.

"Too tough."

"Tss. That's easily--"

"Easily--"

"*Easily* fixed."

Will tries to ease back another step, but every muscle is frozen. His fingers barely twitch when he tries to curl them into fists, only his eyes free to jerk from branch to branch as his heart trips over itself in panic. Christ, they're going to fucking *eat* him, and some lunatic part of him is actually offended, because they don't have the *right*. The rest of him is terrified, because he's thought about it--God, has he thought about it--and he can't honestly think of a worse fate than to not only be bested but to fuel his killer's next kill.

That he's not even going to get a chance to fight makes him struggle all the harder.

He strains against the magic that holds him still, tries to throw himself against the spell and for a minute thinks he's managed to gain a measure of freedom. He lurches, line of sight dropping by a foot as if his knees have given out, only he's still standing straight and tall, isn't he?

Then the pain hits, and he can barely draw breath to scream.

Once it starts, it doesn't stop. He feels stretched, but as if he's being tugged into himself, like a black hole has opened up in the pit of his stomach and started dragging pieces of him into that bottomless well. He's *shrinking*, collapsing inward, and he's pretty sure the awful noise ringing in his ears is coming from him, but he can't do anything about it. It doesn't even sound like him, except in all the ways it does and *can't*--twenty, twenty-five years past embarrassed shyness over a voice that cracks at all the worst times, past a guarded, too-high tenor even his old man never listened to. He's dropped so much muscle and bone he's practically swimming in his clothes, and the things in the trees definitely look bigger than him now, their smiles, fiercely pointed, stretching wide enough to swallow him whole.

He thinks inanely that Lecter is going to be so disappointed at being cheated out of a meal--and then, like summoning the devil, the man is there, striding past the last breaks in the glowing ring without hesitation. His long legs eat up the ground between him and Will, and for one dizzying moment as he bends to scoop Will up, Lecter looks like a giant. He *feels* like a giant as he settles Will on his hip, one big hand cupping the back of Will's head, pressing his face into Hannibal's chest. Whatever happens next, he won't have to see it, and that's--

that's wrong: Hannibal shouldn't be here, shouldn't be trying to shield him when he's going to die right here with Will, because that's *wrong*--

"This is mine," Hannibal says with terrifying conviction, voice a whip crack of certainty that silences the rustling in the trees. "Take him if you dare."

The stillness that follows is so unsettling, Will barely notices that he has control over his limbs once more or that he's clinging with all his might to the back of Hannibal's suit jacket. They're about to die, but something about Hannibal's challenge niggles at the back of his head, the words all wrong but the sentiment enough to widen Will's eyes when realization hits. He's never met anyone who's actually *done* it, but it's the one challenge any human is always allowed, and if Hannibal wins--

Will braces himself for laughter to hiss like static out of the trees, but the chittering click of tongues sounds more like alarm. Leaves shiver as branches are jolted by the weight of leaping bodies, the crackling of twigs marking the retreat of the fae deeper into the woods. Baffled, Will stubbornly lifts his head against the weight of Hannibal's sheltering palm, wondering what on earth the fae saw in Hannibal to make them *run*--the black thing of his visions or the killer in the flesh?--but he sees only Hannibal's cold determination and the frantic bobbing of washed-out flashlights as Jack and the others come running at last.

"Hannibal!" Jack shouts as he charges up to the edge of the fae ring, kicking gingerly at rapidly-withering toadstools until he breaks an entrance for himself. "Where's Will?"

Will stares, because Jack doesn't know him. No one here knows him but Hannibal, who saw him change. As far as anyone's concerned, he's a kid--he's in a kid's body, so maybe he even technically is one--and a kid...a kid wouldn't know anything, would he?

"Who are you people?" Will asks in as small a voice as he can manage, pushing his arms out straight with his hands braced against Hannibal's chest. He fists his hands on Hannibal's lapels at the same time, not actually wanting to be put down. That's not in his plans at all.

Hannibal's smiles are always tiny, like he's far too used to hiding private amusement than honest humor, but his concern looks as genuine as it did when he'd realized he couldn't just undo the wreck he'd made of their friendship. The fact that Will honestly believes that Lecter honestly believed they were friends still makes him want to punch a wall now and then.

"Hello, Will," he says with surprising gentleness, ignoring Jack's stumble to a dumbfounded halt. "I'm Hannibal, and the tall fellow over there is Uncle Jack."

Will makes himself frown. "I don't have an Uncle Jack," he protests, shooting Jack a suspicious look.

Hannibal huffs a near-silent laugh. He almost bends to set Will down, but when Will holds on tighter, he shifts him to a more comfortable position instead. He's far too practiced with the move, and Will belatedly remembers the sister Hannibal mentioned only once. He won't let himself wonder if this is bringing back any memories. He can't let himself feel guilty if it does.

"Will?" Jack asks doubtfully, eyes flicking back and forth between him and Hannibal. "Will Graham?"

Will pointedly clams up. He's not supposed to talk to strangers, right? Although his dad's own instructions had mostly been a long-suffering sigh and a muttered: "Don't scare 'em, Willy."

Hannibal ducks his head a fraction to get his attention, not seeming to mind when Will still can't meet his eyes. "If I may, what's the last thing you remember?"

It's the perfect opening, and Will has to fight to keep his face open and guileless instead of breaking into a grin of triumph. "The fairies wanted to take me, but you held on until they went away."

"Fuck me," Zeller mutters, jaw still hanging after.

Price nails him sharply in the side with his elbow in nearly the same breath. "Language."

A muscle in Jack's jaw jumps. "Are you sure about that?" he asks slowly, face tight. He looks like he wants to pull them aside, Will by the ear, but Will's gambit has already been set in motion, and Jack has no reason to suspect he knows better.

Will nods twice, as decisively as he can. "Hannibal said if they wanted me, they'd have to take me, and then he didn't let go. Just like in the stories."

It's a trump card and everyone here knows it. There is *no* appeal against the Tam Lin defense, partly because anyone who loves you--*ha*--enough to stand fast against fae magic is usually a pretty safe bet, and partly because, once thwarted, the fae are fucking vindictive if they catch you a second time. Not that Will has any family who could claim him in this state--which isn't going to be permanent, right? They'd wanted to eat him, not inconvenience him permanently--but literally no one is going to fight him on this after announcing what he just did in front of nearly two dozen of law enforcement's finest.

Jack wants proof? Will will get him proof. Right from the source, because Hannibal's stuck with him now, like it or not.

The only thing that worries him is that Hannibal doesn't look nearly as displeased by the idea as he ought.

Chapter 2

"So I was old before?"

The EMTs have pronounced the spell stable, though it worries Will that they can't detect an active spell on him at all. That they aren't rushing him right to the hospital means he's got a little more time to work before he's cured, but he's starting to worry just how permanent the change is going to be.

He's not the only one; a hurried conference between Hannibal, Jack, and the EMTs led to being sat down in the back of Jack's SUV, Hannibal settling in on his right as Jack hides behind the wheel, the two men fumbling for age-appropriate terms to explain reverse Van Winkle-ing to a five year-old.

"Yes," Hannibal replies instantly, eyes lit with amusement, "terribly old. Although I believe you were a good deal younger than Uncle Jack, here."

"Pot, meet kettle," Jack mutters, though he doesn't seem too put out. Abruptly his eyes shift focus, going distant as his mouth pulls to one side. "At least this explains some of the disappearances."

"Perhaps a subject for another time," Hannibal suggests, voice mild.

Jack winces. "Right. Listen...Hannibal...that was...one hell of a thing you did back there, but have you really given full thought to what you're signing yourself on for? I mean, obviously we'll do everything we can to return Will to normal, but...." He darts a glance at Will as if to gauge how he's taking this conversation or whether he's even taking in what they're discussing at all. "We have to consider it might be permanent. You have your practice, and even *average* kids are a full-time responsibility. With Will's, ah...special circumstances...."

"Thank you, Jack," Hannibal says politely, "but I'm fully committed to giving Will the support he needs, including acting as his guardian for as long as required. I could do no less for a friend."

"Still. You never struck me as someone...." He tosses another glance at Will, who stares back blankly. It's like Jack can't remember being a kid at all; he's stuck in the body of a five *year* old, not five months. "You know. Looking for that sort of thing. A family. I could--"

"Jack," Hannibal cuts him off with a kind smile. "You have your hands more than full at home already. And while it's been a number of years, I'm not unaccustomed to seeing to the needs of the young."

Jack's brows fly up; it's clear this changes things. "Siblings?"

Hannibal nods, short and sharp. "I'm aware I strike most people as...undemonstrative, shall we say, but my sister would not have agreed."

Jack digests this in silence, eyes softening as Hannibal's use of the past tense registers. Blowing out a quiet sigh, he turns further in seat. "What about you, Will? I notice you haven't asked about your parents--"

Lecter shakes his head minutely. Will picks at the cuffs of his too-large shirt, eyes cast down.

"Mom's been gone forever," he mumbles, "and Dad...he doesn't really...like me around."

Jack frowns. "Sometimes parents don't know how to show that they--"

"I already know what 'special' means," Will interrupts before Jack can warm to his awkward pep talk. "Dad's scared of me. Hannibal's not scared of anything."

"I already fought the Unseelie Court for him, Jack," Hannibal reminds him, backing Will's play as if they'd practiced it. "You should know I'll be no less determined in a court of law if the alternative is to abandon him to neglect."

Jack's sigh is much less quiet this time. "Do you know how many grey hairs you people are giving me? This many," he says, pointing at his head.

Will makes his eyes go wide as he casts a furtive glance up. "That's a *lot*."

"I do hope you'll accept our apologies," Lecter adds demurely. There's only a hint of a smile to give him away, but coming from him, that's the equivalent of a hearty guffaw.

"I don't know which of you is the worse influence."

"I'll certainly strive to do better," Hannibal promises. Will's pretty sure he's swearing to be a worse influence than before. "In the meantime, I wonder if you could both do me a favor?" Will and Jack glance at each other, Will shrugging.

"Shoot," Jack offers.

"Will, I'd like you to stay with Uncle Jack for a moment while I make some enquiries. Jack--would you mind watching him? I wouldn't like to leave him unattended so close to the woods." His concern seems genuine enough, but he's a consummate actor.

"Where are you going?" Will asks nervously, pulling his shirt cuffs closed over his fisting hands.

"Only to ask where one might acquire proper clothes," Hannibal assures him, "among other necessities. Also," he adds, more to Jack, "I don't know what provisions Will made for his dogs while he was away--"

"Dogs?" Will interrupts, shocked and relieved that Hannibal has thought of them at all. "I have dogs?"

He expects dismay, but Hannibal's eyes light up with matching pleasure. "Seven, actually. And between our late start in returning and taking you by the hospital, I hoped I might ask a friend to look in on them until we can collect them."

Jack rears his head back in surprise. "Collect them? You're thinking of kenneling them, right?"

"Of course not." Will hopes his wide eyes look hopeful, not worried. What has he just dragged his pack into? "What boy doesn't dream of four-footed companionship? My sister and I had a horse."

Jack snorts a laugh, deeply unsurprised. "Of course you did. That explains *so* much."

"Thank you." What exactly he's thanking them for remains unclear, but it's plain Hannibal's enjoying himself regardless. "I'll return shortly," he says as he opens the door, pausing only to give Will a reassuring smile.

Jack watches him go for a moment before turning back to Will. "Okay," he says, putting on the exaggeratedly harmless face people use to talk to children. "So I can't offer you three times your weight in dogs, but it's not too late to change your mind. Bella and I always wanted--"

Will snorts. "Jack, relax," he says in his usual tone, the pitch of his voice jarringly out of sync. "I know what I'm doing."

Jack's smile slips away as his face goes blank. "Will," he says flatly, searching Will's face for confirmation. "Will Graham."

"Thought we'd already covered that one, Ja--"

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing?" Jack barks, frowning thunderously.

"Jack, please," Will insists through clenched teeth. "Keep your voice down."

"What, afraid I'm going to blow your--shit. You're afraid I'm going to blow your cover. You think you're going to infiltrate a murder house with someone who could kill you without even trying. Can you even handle a gun like this?" Jack demands, waving a hand in Will's general--and diminished--direction.

"So you do believe me."

"I don't not believe you, it just doesn't make sense! He's always defended you, Will, even when it would've been smarter not to." His eyes still show the guilt of that; Jack, unlike Hannibal, had played it smart. "He just walked right into a fairy ring for you, no questions asked."

"Well, if he really is a psychopath, he probably doesn't process fear the same way you or I would," Will points out, unwilling to ascribe any action of Lecter's to something as simple as emotion.

Jack shakes his head slowly, jaw set. "You didn't see the way he took off after you."

He can see he's not going to win this argument, so he switches tack. "I know I can get him this way, Jack. Whatever proof you need."

"And are you going to find it or make it?"

Will scowls. "You really need to ask me that?"

"Well, considering I ought to be asking if you're up past your bedtime, yeah, I guess I do. You do realize this is entrapment."

"I'm not Hannibal, Jack," Will snaps. "I don't need to plant evidence or *entice* him to do anything, much less commit a crime. He's going to do exactly what he wants to do whether I'm there or not. I just need you to be willing to see the truth when I bring it to you."

Jack takes in a deep breath through his nose before sighing it out harshly. "If you have something for me to see," he says finally, "I'll look." He shakes his head then, the corners of his mouth turning down unhappily. "You're going to be breaking every legal precedent on the books with this if you're right, you know. No one's ever pulled a Fair Janet if they didn't mean it."

Casting Hannibal as an unwed mother determined to drag her baby daddy back from the fairies is almost worth a laugh, and they didn't even get to the transformation stage. Oddly enough, he can't really picture that confrontation as having gone any other way.

"Yeah, well. There's a first time for everything, Jack."

"We'll see," Jack says as the rear passenger door comes open once more. Will tries not to let the buried disappointment in Jack's tone sting.

"Well," Hannibal says, oblivious to or ignoring the lingering tension in the car. "I have good news and bad news."

Jack tilts his head. "Oh?"

"The good news is that Alana has...very graciously agreed to look in on the dogs."

Will can't let himself laugh at Hannibal's chagrined tone, but Jack's under no such restrictions. "I take it she wasn't pleased with your performance?" Jack asks, barely caging a grin.

"I may have been informed that my lack of survival instincts is a serious character flaw that needs to be amended," Hannibal admits wryly.

There's no way Will can resist a dig. "What's that mean?" Will asks, pointedly not meeting Jack's warning stare.

Rather than backtrack or lie, Hannibal translates. "My lady friend gave me 'what for' for not being more careful."

"Oh." Right, *oh*, because he doesn't even need his vibrant imagination to hear Alana's dogged patience as she asks Hannibal what he was thinking, letting Will nearly be the death of him yet again.

Alana...is going to be a problem. He can't imagine her holding a grudge against a kid, but she's always been slow to shift her convictions once they're formed. She trusts her own skills too much, with good reason. Hannibal--he might be distracted from Wil's inevitable slips by the prospect of raising a little copy of himself. Alana's not going to be nearly so trusting.

"What's the bad news?" Jack asks while Will's still digesting this.

Hannibal heaves a tragic sigh. "Unfortunately, the only place in the vicinity likely to have appropriately-sized clothing open at this hour...is Wal-Mart."

Will manages not to cackle like a fiend, but it's a close call. Even Jack looks like he's manfully suppressing a laugh. When Hannibal catches Jack's eye, one corner of his mouth quirks up in genuine amusement, nothing grudging. Clearly he's not unaware of the way others see him, even willing to invite others in on the joke. But then...that's true in a lot of ways, isn't it? All those atrocious puns over the dinner table. Some part of Hannibal must have been hoping to share those punchlines for years.

Will clenches his jaw. He's doing it *again*.

It's irritation at himself more than anything that makes him duck his head, peer up though his lashes and settle his gaze in the vicinity of Lecter's chin. "Is that...bad? I mean, my dad and I shop there all the time," Will manages hesitantly.

Jack stills, catching on to his game and radiating disapproval. Shit. Maybe he'd better dial it back, at least until they're alone.

"It's not bad at all," Hannibal reassures him without a flicker of hesitation. It should be a lie, but...is it, really? Hannibal may move in rarified circles, but Will's never seen him look down on anyone less fortunate, only those poor in manners. "I'm just not a fan of crowds."

Will nods in automatic agreement, even though that's clearly a lie. Only...*no one* likes retail shopping, if Will's being honest. With Hannibal's overdeveloped sense of decorum, stuffy little artisan shops might be more akin to a coping strategy than elitism.

"So what's the plan?" Jack asks. "You know the paperwork on this is going to be a nightmare."

"I'm sure. Well. If the hospital can reverse what was done, I'll contact you immediately, but I'm afraid it's rather more likely we'll need to consult with a specialist. If that's the case, I'll take Will back to Baltimore with me and get him settled in."

"Right," Jack says, turning his focus back to Will. "You be good for Dr. Lecter, okay?" he says pointedly. Don't torture the guy who's trying to help you, he means. He may even have a point. The more Hannibal *likes* him, the more he'll lower his guard.

He has the stupidest urge to cross his fingers as he says, "I will."

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